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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: review of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006)

Statement submitted by International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

Since Heads of State and Government gathered to address profound social problems, particularly poverty eradication, at the Copenhagen Summit for Social Development in 1995, it has been recognized that the voices and thoughts not only of the poor but also of the poorest must be present in the process of social development. The First International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006) continued in this spirit by recognizing those living in poverty as partners in social development. And since its first commemoration in 1987, and official recognition by the United Nations General Assembly in 1992, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, October 17th of each year, turns the page to a new history in which all men and women gather to consider and testify to how they contribute to the eradication of extreme poverty.

Although the Copenhagen Summit inspired us to pose the key question of how to assure that the poorest are able to participate in the eradication of poverty, the question still remains: How do we enable the poorest and most excluded people to participate in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of policies and action plans to eradicate extreme poverty?

"It is by taking the poorest as partners and allies that we would know the best chance of advancing in our understanding of the indivisibility of rights and responsibilities, not just in the life of each individual person, but in the existence of humanity. The poorest truly demonstrate that it is not just the individual person, but humanity as a whole, which is indivisible, linked by one and the same destiny".[1]

Encouraged by the 2005 theme of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, "*Achieving the Millennium Development Goals: Empowering the poorest of the poor*," we appeal to Governments and States to give greater attention to their methodology of empowerment and participation of all those who live in extreme poverty in poverty eradication strategies. Many experiences of people and NGOs working with those in extreme poverty demonstrate that unless those living in extreme poverty are involved in policy and decision making, in the implementation and evaluation of these policies, and on issues that affect their lives, any poverty reduction program is destined to fail by not reaching the poorest people.

Why have the voices of the poor not been heard?

As recognized in a recent UNDP Development Effectiveness Report, "Governments are under increasing pressure to include NGOs in policy formulation. But a key challenge in promoting civil society engagement is to determine who can represent civil society interests and how to reach them".[2] People who live in conditions of poverty and extreme poverty have a key role to play in reminding us of the very serious violations of their human rights, as they show us the myriad of their daily efforts in defense of human rights and human dignity. Despite this fact, "it is common for the poorest and the

[1] Fr. Joseph Wresinski, founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, in an intervention at the Commission on Human Rights in 1987.

[2] UNDP, 2003d, Development Effectiveness Report 2003. Partnership for results. Evaluation Office, New York: UNDP, p. 11.

marginalized groups to get left out of critical fora of public discussion".[3] Whether in a developing country where a large proportion of the population is poor, or in a disadvantaged community in a wealthy country, the usual goal in establishing economic and social development is to invest in projects where the results will be the greatest, most immediate and highly visible in the hopes that these benefits eventually trickle down to others. In reality, the effects of these development projects have not trickled far enough to reach the poorest, who most of the time, are also isolated from those who develop anti-poverty policies and projects. This isolation permits these efforts to continue without considering the voices, experiences, thoughts and ambitions of a crucial and entire group of people.

Why are their voices important?

Mr. Bernard Mourgeon, who at one point lived for several years on the streets in France, explains why.

"In France the exclusion of very poor families is a reality. They find themselves in situations of eviction, heavy indebtedness, unemployment . . . and under the indifferent regard of a society where many live comfortably. To combat poverty you need others. Alone you can do nothing. More and more we work on housing, education, and health in partnership with social and cultural institutions. It is a common venture in which the professionals learn from our life experience. They are astonished at the openness of spirit of persons coming from very precarious lives. These are great moments where different kinds of knowledge meet. They give a lot to families in difficulty and to the others, because the goal is to come out stronger and richer in experience. The authorities need to listen to us so that policies can be created which take account of what we live".[4]

This testimony illustrates the lessons that pain has taught those who experience extreme poverty. We need all of their voices to reverberate strongly, shaping our thinking and our policies.

On the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, people all over the world speak out on behalf of others, their own families and friends, as well as victims of extreme poverty in parts of the world they have never seen. We all need to work from the perspective and with the input of those who need their human rights protected and promoted the most.

Last year's observance of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty at the UN Headquarters in New York featured testimonies of extreme poverty from around the world. These testimonies were shared by international delegates as well as others speaking on behalf of those living in extreme poverty within the United States. At the end of the commemoration, these delegates, men and women from France, Haiti, Guatemala, the Philippines, the United Republic of Tanzania and the United States of America, most living in extreme poverty, participated in a meeting with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan. Speaking to Mr. Annan on 17 October 2005 on

[3] UNDP, 2003d. Already quoted, p. 11.

[4] On October 17, 2005 thirteen delegates, including Mr. Bernard Mourgeon, had a meeting and dialogue with the Secretary-General of the UN, Mr. Kofi Annan, at which he gave this testimony.

behalf of people in the Philippines, Mrs. Tita Villarosa appealed, "Make us your partners as you move forward the agenda on security, development and human rights for all. Let's pool our knowledge together, yours and ours. Let's act now, no longer separately, but together".

As the 1995 World Summit on Social Development sought strategies for poverty eradication and stressed the participation of the poorest and the importance of seeking a fuller knowledge of poverty, the inclusion of the voices of those living in poverty is absolutely required to meet the Millennium Development Goals and other international agreements. Referring to the theme of last year's International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, in his message for that day Mr. Annan reiterated the necessity of this true partnership: "The theme underscores the fact that poverty can be reduced only if we reach out to the poorest of the poor, including those often excluded from the development process. Only through partnerships with them, and by taking steps to tackle inequality, can we eradicate poverty in all its dimensions".

We understand that participation requires bridging differences of cultural diversity as well as mutual comprehension between persons of different social backgrounds. It requires outreach to and understanding the interests of various parties and changes in the dominant economic and social paradigm. To succeed in meeting the ultimate goals, those living in conditions of poverty should be invited and welcomed to the tables of planning, decision-making and implementation strategies in ways that we are prepared to partner with them.

Recommendations

There should be systemic and institutional changes that enable people living in extreme poverty to have a stronger voice in the implementation and evaluation of poverty eradication strategies. To move towards these desired changes, we make the following recommendations with the aim of refocusing the fight against extreme poverty on a partnership with the poorest:[5]

- Evaluate the actions for the eradication of poverty within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with the most disadvantaged populations. By adopting the Millennium Declaration, the General Assembly of the United Nations affirmed that its ultimate goal is to eradicate extreme poverty. The MDGs are a step toward that objective. The most disadvantaged populations are partly invisible in the statistics used to evaluate the MDGs; this is especially true for those used by the World Bank. The reasons for this have already been analyzed and recognized by the United Nations. In addition, the present methods for evaluating the MDGs hide the growing disparities within disadvantaged populations. The UN could support an approach to evaluating the MDG process in which the most disadvantaged populations are present as actors.

[5] On October 17th, 2005 thirteen delegates met and dialogued with the Secretary-General of the UN, Mr. Kofi Annan. These recommendations were part of the proposals made to Mr. Annan at that meeting.

The procedures of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) and the resulting programs must include a partnership with the poorest. This is necessary in order to assure that the definition and application of the programs be efficacious and empower the people most affected. For this partnership to be fruitful, it is necessary to reflect on the terms of the partnership with the most disadvantaged and to consult with the NGOs working with the poorest. This approach will contribute to accelerating progress toward the fulfillment of the MDGs.

Research new ways of establishing or reinforcing collaborations which allow the poorest and those engaged with them over the long term to be recognized as sources and creators of knowledge. An example would be the development, with international financial institutions, of national strategies for the fight against poverty.